Constantius II

(9 September 337 – 3 November 361)

BRIEFING

Constantius II (Latin: *Flavius Julius Constantius*; Ancient Greek: Κωνστάντιος, romanized: *Kōnstántios*; 7 August 317 – 3 November 361) was Roman emperor from 337 to 361. His reign saw constant warfare on the borders against the Sasanian Empire and Germanic peoples, while internally the Roman Empire went through repeated civil wars, court intrigues, and usurpations. His religious policies inflamed domestic conflicts that would continue after his death.

Constantius was a son of Constantine the Great, who elevated him to the imperial rank of *Caesar* on 8 November 324 and after whose death Constantius became *Augustus* together with his brothers, Constantine II and Constans on 9 September 337. He promptly oversaw the massacre of his father-in-law, an uncle, and several cousins, consolidating his hold on power. The brothers divided the empire among themselves, with Constantius receiving Greece, Thrace, the Asian provinces, and Egypt in the east. For the following decade a costly and inconclusive war against Persia took most of Constantius's time and attention. In the meantime, his brothers Constantine and Constans warred over the western provinces of the empire, leaving the former dead in 340 and the latter as sole ruler of the west. The two remaining brothers maintained an uneasy peace with each other until, in 350, Constans was overthrown and assassinated by the usurper Magnentius.

Unwilling to accept Magnentius as co-ruler, Constantius waged a civil war against the usurper, defeating him at the battles of Mursa Major in 351 and Mons Seleucus in 353. Magnentius died by suicide after the latter battle, leaving Constantius as sole ruler of the empire. In 351, Constantius elevated his cousin Constantius Gallus to the subordinate rank of *Caesar* to rule in the east, but had him executed three years later after receiving scathing reports of his violent and corrupt nature. Shortly thereafter, in 355, Constantius promoted his last surviving cousin, Gallus's younger half-brother Julian, to the rank of *Caesar*.

As emperor, Constantius promoted Arianism, banned pagan sacrifices, and issued laws against Jews. His military campaigns against Germanic tribes were successful: he defeated the Alamanni in 354 and campaigned across the Danube against the Quadi and Sarmatians in 357. The war against the Sasanians, which had been in a lull since 350, erupted with renewed intensity in 359 and Constantius travelled to the east in 360 to restore stability after the loss of several border fortresses. However, Julian claimed the rank of *Augustus* in 360, leading to war between the two after Constantius's attempts to persuade Julian to back down failed. No battle was fought, as Constantius became ill and died of fever on 3 November 361 in Mopsuestia, allegedly naming Julian as his rightful successor before his death.

EARLY LIFE

Flavius Julius Constantius was born in 317 at Sirmium, Pannonia, now Serbia. He was the third son of Constantine the Great, and second by his second wife Fausta, the daughter of Maximian. Constantius was made *caesar* by his father on 8 November 324. In 336, religious unrest in Armenia and tense relations between Constantine and king Shapur II caused war to break out between Rome and Sassanid Persia. Though he made initial preparations for the war, Constantine fell ill and sent Constantius east to take command of the eastern frontier. Before Constantius arrived, the Persian general Narses, who was possibly the king's brother, overran Mesopotamia and captured Amida. Constantius promptly attacked Narses, and after suffering minor setbacks defeated and killed Narses at the Battle of Narasara. Constantius captured Amida and initiated a major refortification of the city, enhancing the city's circuit walls and constructing large towers. He also built a new stronghold in the hinterland nearby, naming it *Antinopolis*.

AUGUSTUS IN THE EAST

In early 337, Constantius hurried to Constantinople after receiving news that his father was near death. After Constantine died, Constantius buried him with lavish ceremony in the Church of the Holy Apostles. Soon after his father's death, the army massacred his relatives descended from the marriage of his paternal grandfather Constantius Chlorus to Flavia Maximiana Theodora, though the details are unclear. Two of Constantius's uncles (Julius Constantius and Flavius Dalmatius) and seven of his cousins were killed, including Hannibalianus and Dalmatius, rulers of Pontus and Moesia respectively, leaving Constantius, his two brothers Constantine II and Constans, and three cousins Gallus, Julian and Nepotianus as the only surviving male relatives of Constantine the Great.

While the “official version” was that Constantius's relatives were merely the victims of a mutinous army, Ammianus Marcellinus, Zosimus, Libanius, Athanasius and Julian all blamed Constantius for the event. Burgess considered the latter version to be “consistent with all the evidence”, pointing to multiple factors that he believed lined up with the massacre being a planned attack rather than a spontaneous mutiny - the lack of high-profile punishments as a response, the sparing of all women, the attempted damnatio memoriae on the deceased, and the exile of the survivors Gallus and Julian.

Soon after, Constantius met his brothers in Pannonia at Sirmium to formalize the partition of the empire. Constantius received the eastern provinces, including Constantinople, Thrace, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and Cyrenaica; Constantine received Britannia, Gaul, Hispania, and Mauretania; and Constans, initially under the supervision of Constantine II, received Italy, Africa, Illyricum, Pannonia, Macedonia, and Achaea.

Constantius then hurried east to Antioch to resume the war with Persia. While Constantius was away from the eastern frontier in early 337, King Shapur II assembled a large army, which included war elephants, and launched an attack on Roman territory, laying waste to Mesopotamia and putting the city of Nisibis under siege. Despite initial success, Shapur lifted his siege after his army missed an opportunity to exploit a collapsed wall. When Constantius learned of Shapur's withdrawal from Roman territory, he prepared his army for a counter-attack.

Constantius repeatedly defended the eastern border against invasions by the Sassanid Empire under Shapur. These conflicts were mainly limited to Sassanid sieges of the major fortresses of Roman Mesopotamia, including Nisibis (Nusaybin), Singara, and Amida (Diyarbakir). Although Shapur seems to have been victorious in most of these confrontations, the Sassanids were able to achieve little. However, the Romans won a decisive victory at the Battle of Narasara, killing Shapur's brother, Narses. Ultimately, Constantius was able to push back the invasion, and Shapur failed to make any significant gains.

Meanwhile, Constantine II desired to retain control of Constans's realm, leading the brothers into open conflict. Constantine was killed in 340 near Aquileia during an ambush. As a result, Constans took control of his deceased brother's realms and became sole ruler of the Western two-thirds of the empire. This division lasted until January 350, when Constans was assassinated by forces loyal to the usurper Magnentius.

War against Magnentius

Constantius was determined to march west to fight the usurper. However, feeling that the east still required some sort of imperial presence, he elevated his cousin Constantius Gallus to *caesar* of the eastern provinces. As an extra measure to ensure the loyalty of his cousin, he married the elder of his two sisters, Constantina, to him.

Before facing Magnentius, Constantius first came to terms with Vetranio, a loyal general in Illyricum who had recently been acclaimed emperor by his soldiers. Vetranio immediately sent letters to Constantius pledging his loyalty, which Constantius may have accepted simply in order to stop Magnentius from gaining more support. These events may have been spurred by the action of Constantina, who had since traveled east to marry Gallus. Constantius subsequently sent Vetranio the imperial diadem and acknowledged the general's new position as *augustus*. However, when Constantius arrived, Vetranio willingly resigned his position and accepted Constantius's offer of a comfortable retirement in Bithynia.

In 351, Constantius clashed with Magnentius in Pannonia with a large army. The ensuing Battle of Mursa Major was one of the largest and bloodiest battles ever between two Roman armies. The result was a victory for Constantius, but a costly one. Magnentius survived the battle and, determined to fight on, withdrew into northern Italy. Rather than pursuing his opponent, however, Constantius turned his attention to securing the Danubian border, where he spent the early months of 352 campaigning against the Sarmatians along the middle Danube. After achieving his aims, Constantius advanced on Magnentius in Italy. This action led the cities of Italy to switch their allegiance to him and eject the usurper's garrisons. Again, Magnentius withdrew, this time to southern Gaul.

In 353, Constantius and Magnentius met for the final time at the Battle of Mons Seleucus in southern Gaul, and again Constantius emerged the victor. Magnentius, realizing the futility of continuing his position, committed suicide on 10 August 353.

ROMAN CIVIL WAR OF 350-353

The Roman civil war of 350–353 AD was a war fought between the Roman emperor Constantius II and the usurper Magnentius.

Background

With the death of Constantine I in 337 AD, the empire was divided between his three sons from his marriage to Fausta. Constantine II received Gaul, Spain and Britain. Constantius II was given Asia Minor, Egypt and Syria. Finally, Constans I obtained Italy, North Africa and Illyricum. Constantine II resented his brothers for not respecting his seniority as the eldest, and therefore the senior Augustus. Unhappy over the distribution of the provinces, he invaded Italy in 340 AD, only to be killed in an ambush by Constans' troops. Constans now assumed control of all the western provinces of the empire.

Constans grew unpopular with the army, leading to a military conspiracy which overthrew and killed him in 350 AD. The soldiers elevated a barbarian officer called Magnentius as the new western emperor, bringing him into conflict with Constantius, the sole remaining son of Constantine I.

Civil war

Constantius marched westward to avenge the murder of his brother. Magnentius decided to invade Illyricum, and initially his army performed very well. The situation changed dramatically when his troops encountered Constantius' cataphract cavalry at the Battle of Mursa on 28 September 351. The fighting involved 95,000 troops and left 55,000 casualties in one of the bloodiest battles in Roman history. Magnentius lost and fled to northern Italy, while Constantius slowly regained control of Africa, Spain, and southern Italy. Magnentius decided to retreat into Gaul, where Constantius defeated him again at Mons Seleucus on 3 July 353. Magnentius fled to Lugdunum and committed suicide with his sword on 11 August 353. Constantius had Magnentius' followers and supporters investigated, tortured and killed.

SOLO REIGN

Constantius spent much of the rest of 353 and early 354 on campaign against the Alamanni on the Danube frontier. The campaign was successful and raiding by the Alamanni ceased temporarily. In the meantime, Constantius had been receiving disturbing reports regarding the actions of his cousin Gallus. Possibly as a result of these reports, Constantius concluded a peace with the Alamanni and traveled to Mediolanum (Milan).

In Mediolanum, Constantius first summoned Ursicinus, Gallus's *magister equitum*, for reasons that remain unclear. Constantius then summoned Gallus and Constantina. Although Gallus and Constantina complied with the order at first, when Constantina died in Bithynia, Gallus began to hesitate. However, after some convincing by one of Constantius's agents, Gallus continued his journey west, passing through Constantinople and Thrace to Poetovio (Ptuj) in Pannonia.

In Poetovio, Gallus was arrested by the soldiers of Constantius under the command of Barbatio. Gallus was then moved to Pola and interrogated. Gallus claimed that it was Constantina who was to blame for all the trouble while he was in charge of the eastern provinces. This angered Constantius so greatly that he immediately ordered Gallus's execution. He soon changed his mind, however, and recanted the order. Unfortunately for Gallus, this second order was delayed by Eusebius, one of Constantius's eunuchs, and Gallus was executed.

Religious issues

Paganism

Laws dating from the 350s prescribed the death penalty for those who performed or attended pagan sacrifices, and for the worshipping of idols. Pagan temples were shut down, and the Altar of Victory was removed from the Senate meeting house. There were also frequent episodes of ordinary Christians destroying, pillaging and desecrating many ancient pagan temples, tombs and monuments. Paganism was still popular among the population at the time. The emperor's policies were passively resisted by many governors and magistrates.

In spite of this, Constantius never made any attempt to disband the various Roman priestly colleges or the Vestal Virgins. He never acted against the various pagan schools. At times, he actually made some effort to protect paganism. In fact, he even ordered the election of a priest for Africa. Also, he remained pontifex maximus and was deified by the Roman Senate after his death. His relative moderation toward paganism is reflected by the fact that it was over twenty years after his death, during the reign of Gratian, that any pagan senator protested his treatment of their religion

Christianity

Although often considered an Arian, Constantius ultimately preferred a third, compromise version that lay somewhere in between Arianism and the Nicene Creed, retrospectively called Semi-Arianism. During his reign he attempted to mold the Christian church to follow this compromise position, convening several Christian councils. "Unfortunately for his memory the theologians whose advice he took were ultimately discredited and the malcontents whom he pressed to conform emerged victorious," writes the historian A. H. M. Jones. "The great councils of 359–60 are therefore not reckoned ecumenical in the tradition of the church, and Constantius II is not remembered as a restorer of unity, but as a heretic who arbitrarily imposed his will on the church."

According to the Greek historian Philostorgius (d. 439) in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Constantius sent an Arian bishop known as Theophilus the Indian (also known as "Theophilus of Yemen") to Tharan Yuhanim, then the king of the South Arabian Himyarite Kingdom to convert the people to Christianity. According to the report, Theophilus succeeded in establishing three churches, one of them in the capital Zafar.

Judaism

Judaism faced some severe restrictions under Constantius, who seems to have followed an anti-Jewish policy in line with that of his father. This included edicts to limit the ownership of slaves by Jewish people and banning marriages between Jews and Christian women. Later edicts sought to discourage conversions from Christianity to Judaism by confiscating the apostate's property. However, Constantius's actions in this regard may not have been so much to do with Jewish religion as with Jewish business—apparently, privately owned Jewish businesses were often in competition with state-owned businesses. As a result, Constantius may have sought to provide an advantage to state-owned businesses by limiting the skilled workers and slaves available to Jewish businesses.

Religious policies of Constantius II

The religious policies of Constantius II were a mixture of toleration for some pagan practices and repression for other pagan practices. He also sought to advance the Arian or Semi-Arianian set of beliefs, now generally regarded as heresy, within Christianity. These policies may be contrasted with the religious policies of his father, Constantine the Great, whose Catholic orthodoxy was espoused in the Nicene Creed and who largely tolerated paganism in the Roman Empire. Constantius also sought to repress Judaism.

Policies concerning paganism

Laws dating from the 350s prescribed the death penalty for those who performed or attended pagan sacrifices, and for the worshipping of idols. Pagan temples were shut down, and the Altar of Victory was removed from the Senate meeting house. There were also frequent episodes of ordinary Christians destroying, pillaging and desecrating many ancient pagan temples, tombs and monuments. Paganism was still popular among the population at the time. The emperor's policies were passively resisted by many governors and magistrates.

Anti-paganism acts

Constantius II's legislation began with the banning of the pagan practice of sacrifice. This was in keeping with his personal maxim was: *"Cesset superstitio; sacrificiorum aboleatur insania"* (Let superstition cease; let the folly of sacrifices be abolished). According to Libanius, Constantius was effectively under the control of others who inspired him to end pagan sacrifices. With the collapse of official government sanctioned pagan rites, private cults attempted to infiltrate the temples. In the year 353 Constantius prohibited pagan sacrifice under the penalty of death. He also shut down some temples, forbade access to them, and ended their subsidies of public taxes.

Consistent with Christian theology, Constantius carried out on an active campaign against magicians, astrologers and other diviners. This may also be due to his becoming fearful that others might use these means to make someone else emperor.

In 357 Constantius removed the Altar of Victory in the Senate house because of the complaints of some Christian Senators. This altar had been installed by Augustus in 29 BC; each Senator had traditionally made a sacrifice upon the altar before entering the Senate house. This altar was later restored, either silently, soon after Constantius' departure, or by the emperor Julian.

The pretender Magnentius killed Constans. Although he used Christian symbols on his coins, he revoked the anti-paganism legislation of Constans and even permitted the celebration of nocturnal sacrifices. Three years later, in the year 353, Constantius defeated Magnentius and once again forbade the performance of the rituals. This law seems to have had little effect as we find Constantius once again legislating against paganism in 356. Constantius now declared that anyone found guilty of attending sacrifices or of worshipping idols would be executed. It appears the magistrates were uncomfortable with carrying out this law; it was largely ignored.

Relative moderation

The government's policies could not be rigidly executed due to the strength of paganism among the population. No matter what the imperial edicts declared in their fearful threats, the vast numbers of pagans, and the passive resistance of pagan governors and magistrates rendered them largely impotent in their application. Consequently, the emperor never attempted to disband the various Roman priestly colleges or the Vestal Virgins, He never acted against the various pagan schools. He even ordered the election of a priest for Africa. Also, he remained as the pontifex maximus until his death, and was deified by the Roman Senate after his death. The effects of policy were enough to contribute to a widespread trend towards Christian conversion, though not enough to make paganism extinct. The relative moderation of Constantius' actions toward paganism is reflected by the fact that it was not until over 20 years after Constantius' death, during the reign of Gratian, that any pagan senators protested their religion's treatment.

Actions of ordinaru Christians

Some Christians encouraged the emperor to take even more extreme measures in their zeal to stamp out paganism, e.g. in the aftermath of the abolition of sacrifices. Firmicus Maternus, a convert to Christianity, urged: "Paganism, most holy emperors, must be utterly destroyed and blotted out, and disciplined by the severest enactments of your edicts, lest the deadly delusion of the presumption continue to stain the Roman world" and "How fortunate you are that God, whose agents you are, has reserved for you the destruction of idolatry and the ruin of profane temples."

Constantius enacted another law that exacted a fine from those who were guilty of vandalizing sites holy to pagans and placed the care of these monuments and tombs under the pagan priests.

Policies corcerning Christianity

Although often considered an Arian, Constantius ultimately preferred a third, compromise version that lay somewhere in between Arianism and the Nicene Creed, retrospectively called Semi-Arianism. During his reign he attempted to mold the Christian church to follow this compromise position, convening several Christian councils. The most notable of these were the Council of Rimini and its twin at Seleucia, which met in 359 and 360 respectively. The results of these Christian councils were overturned by the Council of Constantinople in 381, held under Emperor Theodosius I.

Those who won the struggle defined what is "orthodox", and wrote the histories. "Unfortunately for his memory the theologians whose advice he took were ultimately discredited and the malcontents whom he pressed to conform emerged victorious," writes the historian A.H.M. Jones. "The great councils of 359–60 are therefore not reckoned ecumenical in the tradition of the church, and Constantius II is not remembered as a restorer of unity, but as a heretic who arbitrarily imposed his will on the church."

Christian-related edicts issued by Constantius (by himself or with others) included:

- *Exemption from compulsory public service for the clergy.*

- *Exemption from compulsory public service for the sons of clergy.*

- *Tax exemptions for clergy and their servants, and later for their family.*

- *Tax exemption for land owned by the church, but clergy-owned land not tax exempt.*

- *Clergy and the issue of private property.*

- *Bishops exempted from being tried in secular courts.*

- *Christian prostitutes only able to be bought by members of the clergy or other state-approved Christians.*

Policies corcerning Judaism

Judaism faced some severe restrictions under Constantius, who seems to have followed an anti-Jewish policy in line with that of his father. Early in his reign, Constantius issued a double edict in concert with his brothers limiting the ownership of slaves by Jewish people and banning marriages between Jews and Christian women. A later edict issued by Constantius after becoming sole emperor decreed that a person who was proven to have converted from Christianity to Judaism would have all of his property confiscated by the state. However, Constantius' actions in this regard may not have been so much to do with Jewish religion as with Jewish business —apparently, privately owned Jewish businesses were often in competition with state-owned businesses. As a result, Constantius may have sought to provide an advantage to state-owned businesses by limiting the skilled workers and slaves available to Jewish businesses.

Jew-related edicts issued by Constantius (by himself or with others) included:

- Weaving women who moved from working for the government to working for Jews must be restored to the government.

- Jews may not marry Christian women.

- Jews may not attempt to convert Christian women.

- Any non-Jewish slave bought by a Jew will be confiscated by the state.

- If a Jew attempts to circumcise a non-Jewish slave, the slave will be freed and the Jew shall face capital punishment.

- Any Christian slaves owned by a Jew will be taken away and freed.

- A person who is proven to have converted from Christianity to Judaism shall have their property confiscated by the state.

Further crises

On 11 August 355, the *magister militum* Claudius Silvanus revolted in Gaul. Silvanus had surrendered to Constantius after the Battle of Mursa Major. Constantius had made him *magister militum* in 353 with the purpose of blocking the German threats, a feat that Silvanus achieved by bribing the German tribes with the money he had collected. A plot organized by members of Constantius's court led the emperor to recall Silvanus. After Silvanus revolted, he received a letter from Constantius recalling him to Milan, but which made no reference to the revolt. Ursicinus, who was meant to replace Silvanus, bribed some troops, and Silvanus was killed.

Constantius realised that too many threats still faced the Empire, however, and he could not possibly handle all of them by himself. So on 6 November 355, he elevated his last remaining male relative, Julian, to the rank of *caesar*. A few days later, Julian was married to Helena, the last surviving sister of Constantius. Constantius soon sent Julian off to Gaul.

Constantius spent the next few years overseeing affairs in the western part of the empire primarily from his base at Mediolanum. In April–May 357 he visited Rome for the only time in his life. The same year, he forced Sarmatian and Quadi invaders out of Pannonia and Moesia Inferior, then led a successful counter-attack across the Danube.

In the winter of 357–58, Constantius received ambassadors from Shapur II who demanded that Rome restore the lands surrendered by Narseh. Despite rejecting these terms, Constantius tried to avert war with the Sassanid Empire by sending two embassies to Shapur II. Shapur II nevertheless launched another invasion of Roman Mesopotamia. In 360, when news reached Constantius that Shapur II had destroyed Singara (Sinjar), and taken Kiphas (Hasankeyf), Amida (Diyarbakır), and Ad Tigris (Cizre), he decided to travel east to face the re-emergent threat.

Usurpation of Julian and crises in the East

In the meantime, Julian had won some victories against the Alamanni, who had once again invaded Roman Gaul. However, when Constantius requested reinforcements from Julian's army for the eastern campaign, the Gallic legions revolted and proclaimed Julian *augustus*.

On account of the immediate Sassanid threat, Constantius was unable to directly respond to his cousin's usurpation, other than by sending missives in which he tried to convince Julian to resign the title of *augustus* and be satisfied with that of *caesar.* By 361, Constantius saw no alternative but to face the usurper with force, and yet the threat of the Sassanids remained. Constantius had already spent part of early 361 unsuccessfully attempting to re-take the fortress of Ad Tigris. After a time he had withdrawn to Antioch to regroup and prepare for a confrontation with Shapur II. The campaigns of the previous year had inflicted heavy losses on the Sassanids, however, and they did not attempt another round of campaigns that year. This temporary respite in hostilities allowed Constantius to turn his full attention to facing Julian.

Death

Constantius immediately gathered his forces and set off west. However, by the time he reached Mopsuestia in Cilicia, it was clear that he was fatally ill and would not survive to face Julian. The sources claim that realising his death was near, Constantius had himself baptised by Euzoius, the Semi-Arian bishop of Antioch, and then declared that Julian was his rightful successor. Constantius II died of fever on 3 November 361.

Like Constantine the Great, he was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles, in a porphyry sarcophagus that was described in the 10th century by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the *De Ceremoniis*.

MARRIAGES AND CHILDREN

Constantius II was married three times:

First to a daughter of his half-uncle Julius Constantius, whose name is unknown. She was a full-sister of Gallus and a half-sister of Julian. She died c. 352/3.

Second, to Eusebia, a woman of Macedonian origin, originally from the city of Thessalonica, whom Constantius married before his defeat of Magnentius in 353. She died before 361.

Third and lastly, in 361, to Faustina, who gave birth to Constantius's only child, a posthumous daughter named Constantia, who later married Emperor Gratian.

REPUTATION

According to DiMaio and Frakes, "...Constantius is hard for the modern historian to fully understand both due to his own actions and due to the interests of the authors of primary sources for his reign." A. H. M. Jones writes that he "appears in the pages of Ammianus as a conscientious emperor but a vain and stupid man, an easy prey to flatterers. He was timid and suspicious, and interested persons could easily play on his fears for their own advantage." However, Kent and M. and A. Hirmer suggest that the emperor "has suffered at the hands of unsympathetic authors, ecclesiastical and civil alike. To orthodox churchmen he was a bigoted supporter of the Arian heresy, to Julian the Apostate and the many who have subsequently taken his part he was a murderer, a tyrant and inept as a ruler". They go on to add, "Most contemporaries seem in fact to have held him in high esteem, and he certainly inspired loyalty in a way his brother could not".

Eutropius wrote of him,

He was a man of a remarkably tranquil disposition, good-natured, trusting too much to his friends and courtiers, and at last too much in the power of his wives. He conducted himself with great moderation in the commencement of his reign; he enriched his friends, and suffered none, whose active services he had experienced, to go unrewarded. He was however somewhat inclined to severity, whenever any suspicion of an attempt on the government was excited in him; otherwise he was gentle. His fortune is more to be praised in civil than in foreign wars.